

A NINETEENTH CENTURY REFERENCE TO THE USE OF TOOLS BY THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE

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A recent note by the van Lawick-Goodalls (1966) has described, and illustrated with remarkable photographs, the manner in which the Egyptian Vulture, *Neophron percnopterus* (Linnaeus), breaks Ostrich eggs by lifting stones in its beak and throwing them at the eggs. In this connection the following account (Wood, 1877), published more than ninety years ago, is perhaps of interest:

"Two articles of diet which certainly do not seem to fall within the ordinary range of vulture's food are said to be consumed by this bird. The first is the egg of the ostrich, the shell of which is too hard to be broken by the feeble beak of the Egyptian Vulture. The bird cannot, like the *Lämmergeier*, carry the egg into the air and drop it on the ground, because its feet are not large enough to grasp it, and only slip off its round and polished surface. Therefore, instead of raising the egg into the air and dropping it upon a stone, it carries a stone into the air and drops it upon the egg. So at least say the natives of the country which it inhabits, and there is no reason why we should doubt the truth of the statement.

The other article of food is a sort of melon . . ."

It seems likely that the author had heard or read a first or second hand account of the behaviour described by the van Lawick-Goodalls but that, remembering the behaviour of the *Lämmergeier*, he had assumed that the stone was lifted in the claws rather than in the beak. That he did interpret his information in this way is clearly shown by a later passage (p. 525) in which he says:

"The scattered eggs (of the Ostrich) . . . are often eaten not only by beasts, but by birds of prey; the former breaking the shells by knocking them against each other, and the latter by picking up larges stone in their claws, rising above the eggs, and dropping the stones on them".

However, it is interesting that there have been a few reports based on information provided by aborigines, and one on actual observation by a European, that the Australian Black-breasted Buzzard Hawk, *Hamirostra melanosternon*, breaks Emu eggs in precisely this manner (Chisholm, 1954); perhaps further observations on the Egyptian Vulture may show that it, too, sometimes breaks eggs in this way.

REFERENCES

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(Received 3rd June, 1968)